

Citation for published version:

Enria, L 2016, 'Co-Producing Knowledge through Participatory Theatre: Reflections on Ethnography, Empathy and Power', *Qualitative Research*, vol. 16, pp. 319-329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115615387>

DOI:

[10.1177/1468794115615387](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115615387)

Publication date:

2016

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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Co-Producing Knowledge through Participatory Theatre: Reflections on Ethnography, Empathy and Power

This paper is based on methodological reflections from a participatory theatre project with economically marginal youth in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown. It offers empirical considerations on the application of participatory methods in reference to three concerns of feminist research: the situated nature of knowledge; the wish to create non-hierarchical knowledge; and the orientation towards emancipatory action. In discussing the potential for meaningful participation to create inclusive research spaces, the paper suggests the importance of acknowledging the necessarily indeterminate and imperfect nature of our efforts to mitigate power imbalances and the challenge of intersubjective understanding in our research encounters.

Key words: feminist methodology; youth; Sierra Leone; empathy; participatory methods; popular theatre

INTRODUCTION

In Luigi Pirandello's (2003) renowned play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Father eloquently expresses a dilemma that is central to the human condition: how can we ever come to a mutual understanding, he wonders, if 'each one of us has within him a whole world of things'? 'We think we understand each other', the Father concludes, 'but we never really do'. The words that Pirandello crafts for his character reflects a concern with interpretation and the possibility of intersubjective understanding that has been at the heart of a scholarly shift away from positivist social science. Post-positivist scholars have questioned the way knowledge is created, rejecting the notion that an objective truth can be established (Kuhn, 1996; Marcus and Fischer, 1986). This has meant spinning the gaze back towards the researcher, acknowledging the situated nature of our understanding of a social world that is only knowable to us through our subjective lens (Caretta, 2015). Feminist research emerges from this paradigm shift, as a 'perspective which requires that we re-think the validity of research as a process and knowledge-creator' (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000: 90).

This paper offers some empirical reflections on the application of feminist methodologies in reference to three of its core principles: the situated nature of knowledge; the

orientation towards emancipatory action; and the wish to create inclusive research spaces. These reflections are based on my doctoral research project, which involved qualitative and ethnographic research amongst young people engaged in precarious survival strategies on the margins of the informal economy in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The project studied the relationship between labour market exclusion and avenues of political mobilisation amongst young Sierra Leoneans, in an attempt to question narratives that posit a direct link between unemployment and youths' involvement in political violence. This paper considers how participatory methods can be used in an effort to create shared meanings, while at the same time considering the significant challenges to creating truly inclusive spaces. In so doing it situates itself in a discussion of how feminist research principles can be put into practice and of limitations to such an endeavour.

PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE DIFFERENTLY: FEMINIST APPROACHES

In rethinking the way knowledge is produced, feminist research shines a light on the role of power imbalances in framing narratives and in perpetuating systems of oppression (Caretta and Riaño, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). As identified by proponents of feminist standpoint theory, which emphasises the situated nature of knowledge: 'feminism, while necessarily political, at the same time must be centrally concerned with method, truth and epistemology' (Hekman, 1997: 343). Pushing back against the exclusion of women's voices and realities from academic analyses of the social world, feminist researchers have tried to subvert hierarchies of knowledge. This means asking the question of whose voices are being heard in processes of knowledge production and unsettling the presumed authority of the researcher (Reinharz, 1992).

Despite the great diversity of feminist research, its premise that knowledge is subjective and shaped by social relations embedded in power structures frames the distinctive features of

feminist epistemology and methodology. A key component is an emphasis on reflexivity, that is, the willingness to challenge our position as researchers and our collocation in structures of power in relation to the communities we research. Such reflexive exercises are key to the disruption of mainstream knowledge systems, as they raise questions regarding the role of social science in either perpetuating or troubling current forms of injustice. They pose a challenge to feminist researchers in terms of how to ‘produce different knowledge and to produce knowledge differently’ (Lather, 2002: 200). Abandoning the fiction of the researcher as neutral observer, therefore, feminist approaches to social inquiry make explicit their emancipatory goals and their ‘action-orientation’ (Fonow and Cook, 1991: 6).

How, then, are such ‘non-hierarchical’ (Caretta and Riaño, 2016) forms of knowledge to be produced? Moving beyond the acknowledgement of power differentials between researcher and researched requires us to think practically about how to operationalize the demands of feminist research. As Caretta and Riaño (2016) point out, such an exercise rests first of all on the creation of inclusive research spaces. Participatory research methods are seemingly ideal tools for such an endeavour given their aim to produce knowledge collaboratively with researched communities, often in marginalised and underrepresented settings. The affinity between participatory methods and feminist epistemologies is evident in their mutual commitment to ‘honouring the lived experience and knowledge of the people involved’ and to ‘genuine collaboration in research’ (Gatenby and Humphries, 2000: 89). At the heart of participatory feminist research, then, is the question of how relationships of power can be subverted through alternative means of creating knowledge (Cornwall, 2003).

Developing knowledge collaboratively can offer the opportunity to reinstate equality in the authority of different ways of knowing the world. The value of knowledge co-production stems from both the role that it plays in building ‘mutually agreed upon knowledge’ (Caretta, 2015: 2), and from its potential as an emancipatory process in itself. Through the process of

attaining ‘knowledge of reality through common reflection and action’, the oppressed ‘discover themselves as its permanent re-creators’ (Freire, 1996: 51). Working to ensure that the voices and realities of marginalised groups are the driving force behind the research process helps us move away from research that is extractive and that consequently perpetuates the status quo (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

This paper explores my attempts to carry out research on violence, reflecting on how the difficulties emerging from discussions of such a challenging topic highlight both the opportunities and limitations of participatory research methods. Drawing on experience with an anti-violence participatory theatre project undertaken in Freetown before the 2012 elections, the paper firstly considers how participatory drama can facilitate the creation of collaborative and action-oriented knowledge. The paper then turns to the role of empathy in endeavours to make research non-extractive. Underlying these deliberations of the benefits of participatory methods from a feminist viewpoint, however, is an explicit admission of the limits to mitigating power imbalances, as well as the recognition of the persistent challenges of intersubjectivity that Pirandello captured so well. The limits of empathy and the complex and inexorable nature of power, rendered obvious by experiences of violence in the field, highlight the inherently fraught, and often unsatisfactory nature of the research encounter in practice. Considering the multi-directional nature of power dynamics troubles notions of a one-way imbalance between researcher and researched that must be, and can be, effaced simply through the adoption of appropriate research methods. The aim of such reflections on ‘getting lost’ (Lather, 2009a) during fieldwork is thus to suggest how we might think about making research more inclusive in practice while simultaneously acknowledging the indeterminacy and imperfection of such efforts.

STREET THEATRE IN FREETOWN

The streets of Freetown have been the theatre of a tumultuous history, one that is impressed on all corners of the city, from the chains that imprisoned the victims of the slave trade still visible in King Jimmy Market's tunnels to the streets where some of the bloodiest pages of the country's ten year civil war were written. The war, which lasted from 1991 to 2002, has significantly marked the city's landscape, as its population swelled with the internally displaced and many who, amidst the war's destruction, relocated to the city hoping to make a living (Ibrahim and Shepler 2011). The White House¹ neighbourhood is one of those areas that has grown exponentially over the years. Its streets are lined with young people, especially young men, perching on railings, sitting on street corners hoping to make a living in the post-war city through what is known as chasing commission or *jewman business*, that is, buying and selling used goods for a small profit. White House has a bad reputation, with its young men seen to be sitting idly, seemingly up to no good. They are often labelled as *rarray*, a pejorative term for 'pickpockets and petty criminals engaged in violence in their everyday life' (Abdullah, 2005: 173). Since the end of a civil war in which economically marginal young people were at the forefront of all combating factions, unemployed youth have been depicted as potential threats to stability in official reconstruction narratives (Author, 2012). Around election time, White House's image problem gets worse, as unemployed youth are seen to be vulnerable to the lure of violence entrepreneurs (ARI, 2011; ICG, 2008). In 2012, in the months preceding the Presidential elections held in November, I worked with a group of White House youth to develop a street theatre project focused on the issue of violence. The plays were intended to facilitate discussions around violence and public performances were to serve as a tool for peace sensitisation while also challenging the portrayal of young people as irredeemable *rarray* youth. Developed and directed communally, these dramatizations presented young people's interpretations; they told stories about violence in White House as they saw it happen (and

¹ The names of places and people have been changed.

occasionally, as they themselves committed it). The street actors of White House crafted nuanced narratives that reflected a careful understanding of the causes of violence as rooted in the structural dynamics of economic adversity. They did not deny the existence of violence in their community, but they complicated the accounts that posit youth as inexorably criminal.

Two episodes were particularly insightful. The first depicted a scene of domestic violence between a young man and his girlfriend. The act opens with a young man getting ready to go out, as his girlfriend approaches him to ask for *chop money* (money for food). As he tells her he does not have any, she points to their children and accuses him of neglect, and an altercation ensues resulting in the man beating his wife. The next scene sees the couple at a police station. The man explains to the police officer that the ‘pressures’ of having to provide for his family as a man are too much. In the play the violence is not excused, as evidenced by the case being taken to the police. It is however explained in the context of the anxieties surrounding the performance of masculinity in a context of severe economic constraints. By highlighting the anger and pain caused by the man’s inability to live up to his partner’s expectations of him as a provider, the play underlined the corrosive consequences of poverty on the community (Author, forthcoming).

The second episode dealt with the issue of electoral violence. Two groups of men congregate on opposite sides of the room, both in a circle as they gamble and drink together. One of them turns to the audience and notes: ‘We gamble to support our children’. As they gamble a politician from each party approaches each group. As they arrive, young men cheer for the politicians, calling them ‘Papi’ and promising them their vote. At this point the candidates begin to give out money and tell the young men to attack the opposing group. As the chanting goes on, the supporters make clear that they are ready to be violent. ‘I will stab someone for you’, one of them says. The next scene portrays the two groups confronting each other singing opposing party songs, culminating in a fight that leaves some supporters injured

and others dead. Stepping over their young supporters' prostrate bodies, the two politicians walk towards the audience shaking each other's hand and embracing. The scene closes with a narrator highlighting the uselessness of fighting for politics. As in the previous episode, young people's engagement in violence was situated in their economic condition as well as being combined with an emphasis on the exploitation of young people by powerful interests.

PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE, INSPIRING ACTION

These brief examples reflect the potential for drama as a tool of representation and for observing shared meaning creation. These plays offered a first foray into a challenging topic that I later explored further through life histories and extensive participant observation. The spaces that were episodically created during rehearsals offered some insights into the use of theatre as a way to co-produce knowledge and into the foundations of research as praxis. The study of violence makes especially vivid the challenges of creating empowering and collaborative research spaces. From an ethical point of view, researchers of violent histories have weighed the cathartic nature of storytelling against the potentially re-traumatising effects of retelling violent encounters (Leydesdorff et al, 1999). The testing nature of such conversations becomes even starker if they confront us with perpetrators of violence, as we attempt to understand acts that seem incomprehensible and inexcusable (Robben, 2012).

Ethnographic methods appear ideally suited for feminist research, given their emphasis on experiential knowledge and interpretation through contextual frames of meaning developed with participants. Participatory theatre, as one method for developing ethnographic observations, offered an especially useful approach for dealing with the issue of violence. It helped maintain a commitment to privileging participants' experiences. At the same time it departed from the assumption that we can achieve complete intersubjective understanding of issues such as violence, no matter how contextualised our knowledge of local frames of

meaning, by explicitly focusing on young people's representations of reality through performance.

Furthermore, asking research participants to step out of themselves, acting as others, could offer a means to externalise painful experiences, making them generalised and eschewing the need to ascertain veracity and establish blame. For example, Junior, a thirty year old man who had been chasing commission in White House for over fifteen years had, like many of his companions, experienced the violence he depicted in the plays first hand. He bore the scars of a large wound on his back inflicted during a fight between the ruling and the opposition party in a neighbouring slum area in 2007. As he recounted in a later individual interview:

One guy came and knocked me off with a cutlass. I had 22 stitches on my back. At that time, all the boys in White House got annoyed and started to fight. [I was fighting] because I became so disgruntled when I saw my blood.²

Depicting a scene of electoral violence through theatrical representation allowed him to express his experiences without having to explicitly convey difficult memories and owning up in public to having taken part in this particular violent episode. The nature of engagement still needed to be constantly negotiated at the individual level to avoid potentially triggering experiences, yet the creation of fictional stories to represent reality erected a protective barrier between participants and these challenging themes. At the same time, by developing these shared scripts, White House youth could author their own narratives about the reality of their social worlds and they could decide how their stories were told collectively.

Through its potential for less intrusive and more collaborative knowledge-production, participatory theatre can also address the action orientation of feminist research. As Boal (2008: xxiii) identifies, popular theatre can become 'a weapon of liberation' in the transformation of society. Transformation is not a short-term process, certainly not one that can be achieved

² Interview, Freetown 20.03.2012

through a small and troubled street theatre project. Yet, this example can offer some initial insights into how theatre can help develop consciousness of structures of oppression and start tearing down some barriers to a more egalitarian research process. As we met in the evenings in the attic of a squatted building in White House, we discussed the reasons for taking part. While I had undoubtedly set the agenda, a multiplicity of motives for taking part emerged which pointed to a window of opportunity for emancipatory research. Solomon, a long-term White House dweller for example suggested that by taking part, he hoped to challenge dominant narratives: ‘They say we are idlers, and we are going to show them that we can create things for ourselves so we are no longer idle’.³ Furthermore, the scripting of plays that situated violence in a broader socio-political context, teasing out its complex causes, and taking them to the streets of Freetown formed the basis of a powerful critique of the status quo. These theatrical representations could thus also be seen as emancipatory actions in themselves, as a way of countering stigmatising narratives, and as avenues to develop collective and public social critiques.

BUILDING INCLUSIVE SPACES THROUGH EMPATHY: OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

A key concern of feminist research is how to avoid being extractive and objectifying (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This is especially problematic when it exacerbates those socio-economic hierarchies in which researcher and researched are differently placed. My position as a white, educated woman highlighted the challenges of representation, as in collecting and presenting people’s stories for my qualification, structural inequalities determined by race and economic status were inescapably at play. In particular, carrying out research on unemployment, combined with my visibility as ‘other’ in the White House area, created significant

³ Group discussion, Freetown, 09.03.2012

expectations. Despite repetitions of the aims and limitations of research that satisfy the needs of informed consent, it is not ultimately possible to control hopes. More than that, the disconnect between the research output and participants' hopes that engaging in the research process would have a more lasting and positive impact on their lives made me painfully aware of the ultimate impossibility of entirely countering a sense that research with marginalised communities is extractive.

Having said that, beyond the use of participatory methods for co-operative interpretation, the creation of relationships and empathetic spaces to tell one's life story can also help mitigate the sense of the research's limited impact in the lives of groups living in poverty. Empathising with research participants can help us better understand their experiential world (Bondi, 2003). But perhaps more importantly, telling stories and having them listened to, can help salvage 'a sense that we have some say in the way our lives unfold' (Jackson, 2002: 17). Empathy, then, not only helps the researcher navigate the obstacles of intersubjectivity, it also shapes the nature of the space and relations through which research takes places. Developing durable human relations with participants that stretched beyond the research encounter, entering their life worlds and sharing my own, opened the possibility for such encounters to become more reciprocal. These relationships are thus not a by-product of feminist research but its cornerstone.

Building empathetic spaces does not however translate into an erasure of power differentials, an assumption encouraged by the 'liberal embrace of empathy that reduces otherness to sameness' (Lather, 2009b: 19). This was made very clear one evening as I sat in one of White House's hang out places. Mohamed, a young man I had met a year before approached me and I hardly recognised him as he had lost a significant amount of weight. As he pulled me to one side he began to explain that his partner had recently died of HIV and that he himself had been diagnosed but that without enough money to buy food, and too ashamed

to ask others for help, he was unable to take the anti-retroviral drugs regularly. Empathising with respondents' predicament need not mean losing sight of one's positionality and awareness of the incompleteness of intersubjective understanding. Mine and Mohamed's lives and the daily challenges we might face could not be more different. Rather than lulling us into a false sense of comfort, therefore, empathy can instead push us towards constant problematization and reflexivity, and to embrace the discomfort and challenges brought about by the researcher's collocation in the very power structures she tries to subvert. Furthermore, if research might be rendered less extractive by developing human relations and spending time with informants, it also opens up far more complicated interactions and layers of responsibility—as evidenced by Mohamed's request for help.

Participatory methods such as street theatre and empathetic spaces for discussion make for more egalitarian research; they do not efface the difference that exists between us. Recognising this also means resisting our impulses to 'possess, know, and grasp', acknowledging that there are certain aspects of respondents' lives that we 'ought not to assume we have the right to know' (Lather, 2002: 213). Violent experiences are a key example: as I contemplated ways to make conversations about violence less extractive, I also had to consider the possibility that I did not have the right to make certain stories the subject of my inquiries. The imperfections and limitations of knowledge, even when collectively produced, may thus not be simply barriers but also symbols of our respect for the integrity of others' subjectivity.

The violence of Freetown's streets also made evident the challenges of overcoming imbalances and inequality in a different way. The centrality of violence in my research made the multi-directional and inexorable nature of power relations evident. Alongside our efforts to make research empowering, we must also see those forms of power that already exist as the researched shape their own presents and futures. Even in structurally dire situations, my informants made decisions, engaged with their lives and with those of others actively and

occasionally destructively, violently. A practical commitment to transformation requires engaging with participants as multifaceted agents, understanding how those who are ‘oppressed’ may act according to a plethora of intentions, which may vary from emancipation to the sustenance of the status quo. Despite its inhabitants commitment to counter negative images of their community, White House could often be a volatile place as quarrels over commission, disputes between lovers or attempts to establish one’s authority in the street occasionally escalated into violent confrontations. Having immersed myself in my research context, I was often present when violent physical fights broke out. Some episodes of violence also affected me more personally, as I was manhandled and hit on several occasions and experienced various degrees of sexual harassment from key informants.

This particularly difficult aspect of the research process enabled me to maintain a nuanced perspective on the young people I was researching and of my own position in the White House community. It is important to note that the communities I researched were by no means prevalently violent and White House youth engaged with their marginality creatively and proactively. While recognising this, it is also necessary not to shy away from the fact that situations and places can turn destructive and violent. Recognising that in certain situations, hardly specific to Sierra Leone, violence is normalised, as a means to achieve internal order, to gain status or to assert power over others was an important research insight. Such ‘accidental’, unplanned observations during fieldwork can open invaluable windows into the social and political dynamics we set out to study (Fuji, 2014). Experiencing violence up close, as Woon (2013: 32) notes, ‘opens up the researcher to different emotional engagements and connections with his/her respondents’, and can thus go some way in breaking down intersubjective barriers in the research of violence. This emotional fieldwork, however, also raises important methodological and ethical issues that strike at the core of feminist research paradigms.

Studying violence may bring us into close contact with it in disturbing ways, yet these

experiences are often silenced. The requirements for researchers to immerse themselves in cross-cultural research settings in order to mitigate power imbalances, often obscure the fact that such immersion can put the researcher in a vulnerable position (Ross, 2015). While it is essential for researchers, especially those that come into marginalised communities as outsiders as I did, to identify her privilege, this ought not to result in essentialising the ‘other’ as powerless. As I endeavoured to reflect on and mitigate my position of power given my collocation in global racial and economic hierarchies, I struggled to effectively engage with my own vulnerabilities. While offering to establish deep and reciprocal interactions with my informants facilitated a less hierarchical research process, it also occasionally rendered me liable to manipulation and intimidation.

CONCLUSION

The reflections offered in this paper bear testimony to the complex, and often imperfect, nature of attempts to put feminist research methods into practice. They offer insights into three core concerns of feminist research: namely the situated nature of knowledge; the orientation towards emancipatory action and the creation of non-hierarchical research spaces. Firstly, the White House theatre project showed how participatory drama can offer an avenue to create knowledge collaboratively, allowing participants to present their own interpretations of their reality. Asking participants to step out of themselves to perform the world they experience around them, not only protected them from having to directly confront painful memories, it also allowed White House youth to tell their own stories collectively and to produce knowledge rooted in their experiences. Secondly, these stories, intended to be performed in public, were also opportunities to translate collaborate knowledge production into action, as through performance these young people countered their stigmatisation as idlers and brought their critique of the status quo to the streets. Thirdly, the paper considered how participatory theatre

and empathetic approaches to research can create inclusive and collaborative spaces for research. At the same time, while the production of non-hierarchical knowledge can begin to break down barriers to equity, humility is essential in these endeavours, as the challenge of societal transformation and intersubjective understanding requires more than an adequate methodological toolkit. Violent field experiences reveal the complex and often insurmountable nature of such differences, exposing the challenges to the creation of entirely non-hierarchical and inclusive spaces. The path to egalitarian knowledge creation is a constant process, an imperfect one that confronts us with often irresolvable challenges. Constant reflection, experimentation with different methods in response to specific challenges, the creation of empathetic, reciprocal relationships and openness to productively facing our often uncomfortable positionality in the field offers a first step in dealing with these challenges.

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